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A Year Inside the Black Lives Matter Movement

How America's new generation of civil rights activists is mobilizing in the age of Trump

By **TOURÉ**

Black Lives Matter protest in New York City, July 10, 2016.

Benedict Evans/Redux

Months before the now infamous Unite the Right march this summer, the 10 or so members of the Charlottesville chapter of **Black Lives Matter** heard that the largest white-supremacist rally anyone had seen in years was coming to their town. They leapt into action. First, they pleaded with local leaders – don't let this happen. Push it elsewhere. The city won't be safe. The police told the BLM members to stay home. But they couldn't. "We knew it would be the largest fascist gathering in decades," says David Straughn, an actor and writer and a member of BLM Charlottesville. "We had to get others to come help us defend the community." The group put out a call to action to as

many BLM members as it could. And so, on Saturday, August 12th, at noon, when the rally began, BLM was ready.

“There was a strong BLM presence,” says Tsara Nock, a University of Virginia student and BLM member. “But they didn’t come in and say, ‘We want to do our own thing.’ They were here to see what the activists in Charlottesville needed.” BLM set up safe zones with food and water for counterprotesters. But things quickly grew violent. “The white nationalists had weapons, shields, helmets,” says Dr. Lisa Woolfork, a UVA English professor and BLM member. “They were there to intimidate. They were there to inflict harm, physical and mental harm.” Straughn says, “The white supremacists, neo-Nazis and alt-right members hit people with sticks, threw rocks, threw bricks, sprayed clergy members with pepper spray in the face.”

Every member of BLM who was there that day says they responded with nonviolence. “We came to march,” Straughn says. “Some people assume Black Lives Matter is a violent organization, and we didn’t want to give that impression. We came unarmed. We came with nothing but peace in our hearts and aggressive words for the Nazis. We knew that if we tried to engage them violently, we would be crucified by the media.”

If BLM being described as nonviolent sounds strange to you, then you’re probably watching too much Fox News. The movement has been wildly misunderstood partly because of how it’s caricatured and demonized by right-wing media. “We absolutely don’t consider Black Lives Matter a hate group,” says Heidi Beirich, the head of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence project, which tracks hate groups. “Black Lives Matter is not a racist group; anyone can join. It’s a movement to expand civil rights for the oppressed in this society. It’s a peaceful protest against oppression. There’s simply no equivalence between Black Lives Matter and a hate group. It’s truly offensive to equate them.”

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The policy of nonviolence is shared by BLM activists around the country. “I refuse to cede the moral high ground to the supremacy we fight,” says Brittany Packnett, an activist and co-founder of Campaign Zero, which aims to end police violence. “We don’t need to become that which we are fighting.”

As the white-supremacist rally was ending that Saturday afternoon in Charlottesville, Straughn was in the crowd, walking with a large band of counterprotesters. “We thought the day was won,” he says. “We went to march down Water Street, chanting, ‘Whose streets? Our streets!’ We thought there was complete victory. It was a beautiful moment.” For several blocks, he marched alongside a white woman he didn’t know. He says he respected her for being out there, and as they walked he began to feel close to her. He didn’t know until later that her name was Heather Heyer. “Then,” he says, “we turned left onto Fourth Street and that’s when the terrorist attack happened.” A gray Dodge Challenger came racing through the crowd, crashing into dozens of people. “I was a foot away from Heather when she was hit,” he says quietly. “I saw people in the air, and then I saw a car with a bashed windshield right in front of me. I looked down and saw Heather bleeding from the leg. I saw her eyes fluttering. I saw her eyes roll to the back of her head, and I saw the life pass from her body. For five or six seconds, I forgot how to scream, and then I screamed, ‘Medic!’ as loud as I’ve ever screamed in my life.”

The attack in Charlottesville changed everything. We saw the racist fringe that usually hides in the corners of the Internet emerge to show its power. They were American terrorists sending a message to the nation – we’re here, we have numbers, we have weapons, be afraid. And the president of the United States answered by repeatedly signaling that he’s not discomfited by them. “He is in very real terms *their* president, and he constantly affirms that,” says Melina Abdullah, professor and chair of Pan-African studies at California State University, Los Angeles, and one of the founding members of BLM L.A. “Trump is the white supremacist in chief.”

We now live in a world where white supremacists are trying to become mainstream, and the Oval Office is winking at them. A country where Attorney General Jeff Sessions' Department of Justice is uninterested in police reform because he's focused instead on doubling down on the endless and racist drug war, adding private prisons, and reducing the scrutiny of police departments while arming cops with the military's guns and tanks. Meanwhile, the president publicly jokes that cops should be more physically aggressive with suspects and repeatedly attacks NFL players who dare challenge the status quo by quietly kneeling during the national anthem.

But BLM activists say they are fighting a problem much bigger than **Donald Trump**. Even when a black man was the so-called leader of the free world, there was a rash of incidents around the country in which police officers were videotaped killing unarmed black people. The injustice became harder and harder for the mainstream culture to ignore. It is BLM – grandchild of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the Sixties – that emerged from the grassroots to articulate that these deaths were not a disconnected series of events but part of a national, systemic problem that flows out of institutional racism.

Even as the movement has done much to raise awareness, the killings they are protesting show no signs of abating. “In 13 of the 100 largest cities, police kill black men at higher rates than the U.S. murder rate,” says activist and Campaign Zero co-founder Sam Sinyangwe. “Black men in many cities face a higher risk of being killed by police than the average American has of being killed by anyone.” And the policy and tone of the Trump era suggests more violence and more vulnerability ahead. “What shifted under a Trump regime,” Abdullah says, “is there’ll be much less opportunity to work with people in any level of administration. And we expect a trickle-down effect in policing as far as making police feel empowered and emboldened to unleash themselves on the black community.”

Addressing America’s police-violence problem requires a monumental restructuring of the status quo, including changing the use-of-force policies in police departments, employing body cameras, hiring more officers who live in the neighborhoods they patrol, combating institutional racism and bringing about a new understanding of how black bodies are perceived. Any of that would be hard to achieve under any president, but it feels impossible when the leaders of the executive branch see black Americans as little more than a tool to energize their voters. In both policy and rhetoric, this White House will be hostile to Black Lives Matter and classify its activists as all but enemy combatants. So how does BLM function in the Trump era?

One thing it does not do is regret 2016. BLM chose not to endorse a candidate in the election, and many members say that Trump’s win did not make them wish they had. “The virus is white supremacy,” Packnett says. “We need to focus on the white supremacy that grew Trump in the first place.” Rather than looking to elected officials, BLM members seem determined to rely on themselves to force change. “It would’ve looked

very different under Hillary Clinton,” Abdullah says, “but it wouldn’t have been any kind of ushering in of black liberation under her either. You can’t rely on those in elected office to move us toward where we need to be. We choose to exercise a muscle that says our power and our liberation relies on us.”

For more than a year, I traveled around the country, from New York to St. Louis to D.C. to L.A., interviewing BLM members about how to go forward when sitting at the table of power is not possible. The BLM people I spoke to are responding to being shut out of federal conversations by taking action on the local level. That means engaging with lawyers to defend those who are stopped by police, shutting down highways to force attention on issues of racial justice, raising awareness of the problems and potential solutions with websites like joincampaignzero.org and creating safe spaces where black people can feel affirmed. They care about rewriting laws as well as nurturing spirits, caring for each other and teaching their children that a different future is possible. Being in the movement is, for many, like having an all-consuming second job that strains both body and spirit. “We’re all exhausted,” Packnett says. “Not just because I’m working for years and not sleeping, but we’re also just emotionally taxed. We’re dealing with black pain and black death all the time.” Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of BLM, says, “Having to deal with so much death so often is pretty traumatic. Having a movement makes me feel like I’m actually doing something instead of sitting around waiting for black people to die.”

The first meeting of what would become the Black Lives Matter organization was held on July 15th, 2013, two days after George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin. “It was in L.A.,” says Abdullah, “in this black artists’ community called St. Elmo Village. That’s where Patrisse was living at the time.” Cullors is one of the three founders of the BLM organization, along with Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza. That first meeting came soon after Garza’s now-famous “Love Letter to Black People” was posted on Facebook. It included the phrase “our lives matter.” Cullors reposted it with the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter. But the notion that the hashtag magically went viral is a bit romantic. “We didn’t just call for Black Lives Matter and it turned viral,” Cullors says. “We were having discussions. We built platforms on Twitter, on Facebook and on Tumblr. Opal helped really develop the communications plan so that it could go viral.” The nascent group was called “Justice for Trayvon Martin Los Angeles.”

That first meeting lasted more than three hours in a cramped room. Shamell Bell, a Ph.D. candidate and a choreographer who remains part of BLM, says, “It seemed like an Underground Railroad type of meeting. It seemed like something powerful was going to happen.” About 30 people were there, most either friends of Cullors, a longtime activist, or Abdullah, a professor whom several women said they look up to as a “spiritual mom.” “Many of us were tired and disturbed by the lack of recognition towards the killings of black people by vigilantes and law enforcement,” Cullors says. “We were tired of it not leading the news. We were tired of it not being a part of the conversation around racial justice. We were like, ‘What are we going to do next? What’s the strategy?’” They talked about fighting against the construction of more jails in Los Angeles. They discussed defunding law enforcement. They considered boycotting Nestlé for its involvement with ALEC, the conservative policy group behind Stand Your Ground. They talked about Marissa Alexander, who was not protected under the same Stand Your Ground law that factored into Zimmerman’s acquittal and was in prison in Florida for firing a warning shot in an attempt to escape her abusive husband. (She has since been released.)

“Even then, it was not just about Trayvon but the very different ways that Trayvon Martins appear,” says Bell. They discussed direct actions that they knew would have an impact. “We were very deliberate about how we wanted the organization to unfold,” Abdullah says. “So there were some basic principles.” One of those was, “We don’t want to disrupt our space, we want to disrupt the spaces that represent those forces who are oppressing us,” she says, meaning: Their protests should take place in white neighborhoods. “We decided we wanted to do a march,” Abdullah says, “and we did it in Beverly Hills intentionally because that’s what represents white-supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative capitalism.”

At the first meeting, they also talked about how to create something that would last. “We were intentional about wanting to build a movement, not a moment,” Abdullah says. “We really wanted to push for a new vision instead of just protesting,” says Cullors. “Protesting is super important, but we wanted to be protesting with a set of demands, protesting with a strategy.” All 30 people who were at that initial meeting are still involved with the organization.

Over the following year, Justice for Trayvon Martin worked to create chapters in other cities and spread its message. Then, on August 9th, 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri. There had been other tragic, controversial killings, but one big difference in Ferguson was that after the shooting, Brown's body lay in the street for more than four hours. Crowds gathered and took photos and videos that went viral. Brown's body, laying in the hot summer sun for hours, communicated a lack of respect for his life – which was received as a lack of respect for all black life. "It was a disrespected death," says Kayla Reed, a St. Louis resident who joined the Ferguson uprising on day one. "It is repulsive that he had to lay there for four and a half hours and that his own grandmother had to plead that a sheet be put over his body."

Brown's killing sparked massive protests, and the police pushed back in harsh ways, imposing a curfew, forcing protesters to march rather than stay in one location, tear-gassing them at times. The story dominated the national news for days. People from around the country saw what was happening in Ferguson and decided to join. "I was looking at what was happening on the news and I was looking at what was happening on Twitter, and there were two different stories," says DeRay Mckesson, who was then working in the Minneapolis public-education system and has become an activist and co-founder of Campaign Zero with Packnett and Sinyangwe. "On CNN, I saw crazy protesters, and on Twitter, I saw pain. I was like, 'I'm just gonna go.'" He got in a car and drove nine hours to St. Louis, then found a place to stay through Facebook. Many people have similar stories. "The NAACP didn't send their special-ops team," Mckesson says. "The churches didn't organize in the way we thought they would. We had to figure it out." They ended up protesting in the streets of Ferguson for more than 300 days, and the lessons they learned, the credibility they gained and the media attention they got – all of that led to Black Lives Matter exploding into a national movement.

Several days into the protests, members of Justice for Trayvon Martin traveled to Ferguson to lend their support. Cullors and Abdullah were among them. "We were very intentional about that visit," Cullors says. "We brought only people who had specific skill sets. We brought youth workers, we brought medical doctors, we brought healers, we brought alternative media, we brought lawyers." They also brought signs, some of which said "Black Lives Matter." (Abdullah says around the time they went to Ferguson, Justice for Trayvon Martin changed its name to Black Lives Matter.)

Ferguson protesters were photographed holding the signs, and over time media began referring to the protests as Black Lives Matter. Since Ferguson, BLM has grown into a comprehensive modern civil rights movement that sees civilian interactions with police as one part of a systemic problem. Some say there are thousands of active supporters in both the movement and the organization, but it's hard to know how many people are involved. "There are about 40 recognized chapters in the networks," says Aaron Goggans, an essayist, poet, organizer and movement strategist. "Most of them have a core team from about four to 15 members. That's core leadership of a few hundred people, with probably thousands of people who would say that they roll with BLM." There are also

groups around the U.S. and even in Canada and the U.K. calling themselves Black Lives Matter X – insert a city name. “If you include donors, volunteers, people joining list servers, then you are probably looking at active support in the tens of thousands,” Goggans says. “If you include people who come to our [events], then it’s a whole lot more. If you count all the things that people say are BLM events, then the number gets really high.” There have been groups that claim an affiliation with BLM but are not in alignment with its guiding values – such as empathy, diversity, justice, globalism, and being queer- and transgender-affirming and unapologetically black – and have been harmful to the movement. To become an official chapter, local leaders would contact BLM staff and fill out an application to be reviewed by the network, but BLM suspended further chapter approvals in 2016.

Decision-making about specific goals or direct actions is made at the local group level. There is no national leadership; it is diffused among autonomous chapters and its structure is not entirely clear to outsiders, by design. The members I interviewed discussed a range of ideas, from imagining transformational new systems to address the inequality and oppression in society to more specific and immediate policy goals. For some, imagining new systems includes radical ideas like abolishing the police force. In BLM circles, it’s referred to as being an “abolitionist.” “It’s not that the police are bad at doing something good,” Goggans says. “It’s that they’re good at doing something very bad. The system is not reformable – the entire thing needs to change.” Some say they foresee neighborhoods policed by unarmed community members instead of by the state’s armed guards. Others admit that they’re unsure what a post-police world would look like specifically, but for them the current situation is so untenable that anything else is preferable. But they also know that the problem is greater than the moment when an officer confronts a black citizen. “The question isn’t about that moment,” Cullors says. “If we sort of rewind time, what resources did they have in that neighborhood? Do they have access to after-school programming? Do they have access to career development? I’m talking about really basic things that can lead to different life choices for black people, that can lead to a different experience and a different interaction with law enforcement.”

Sometimes resistance doesn't look like a political act – sometimes it looks like people in a park talking about their dreams. Each Sunday afternoon in Washington, D.C.'s Meridien Hill Park, also known as Malcolm X Park, Black Lives Matter members come together in the same shaded spot to celebrate what they call Black Joy Sundays. They listen to African music and burn sage as they talk, dance and sing. The rule is just do whatever brings you joy. On the Sunday that I visited with them, people were making signs with messages of self-esteem or kicking around a soccer ball or playing cards. On a nearby tree was a large sign proclaiming this as a "Black Only Healing Space where we can be affirmed in our blackness and cultivate a shared sense of black joy." Beneath it is a handout explaining why this needs to be a black-only space: It isn't about oppressing

white people, it's about black people getting a space where they can feel free. "Spending time in a space being loved by black people is revolutionary and valuable," says Erika Totten, who is a spiritual life coach and a committed member of the movement.

The stress and anxiety of living in a nation that promises liberty and justice for all but struggles with letting black people have those privileges, a nation where a significant portion of the country is openly racist, including the commander in chief, all that can cause deep spiritual pain. BLM considers that part of its purview as well. Members are not here just to agitate for political rights, they also see the need to soothe souls. "What I'm seeing is symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder," says Totten. "If you're not experiencing any joy, you're going to be defeated, you're going to be angry. If you're only focused on resistance, it's just not healthy."

BLM offers all sorts of ways to resist – members speak of doing "movement work," a phrase with a very elastic definition. It can mean making calls, organizing meetings, engaging with lawyers, doing interviews, creating art, building websites, tweeting facts or just helping fellow members get by. "I consider part of my movement work to be watching my friend's kid every other Friday so she can go on date night with her husband, because that helps her be sustained and be stronger," says Goggans. Of course, movement work also means direct action. One part of direct action is, as Goggans describes it, "Shutting things down."

A core BLM tactic has been highway shutdowns. It's been used in Oakland, L.A., Denver, Dallas, Chicago, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Toronto and many other cities. "The strategic reason," Goggans says, "is you have to make the gears of the machine stop working." He references the civil rights legend Bayard Rustin, who spoke of "angelic troublemakers" who are needed to make the system unworkable, to make the gears of the machine stop. "The only weapon we have is our bodies," Rustin famously said. "And we need to tuck them in places so wheels don't turn." What Rustin and Goggans are talking about is civil disobedience aimed at halting the flow of capitalism. The idea is that if protesters can slow the basic functioning of the capitalist system, even for a short time, then the system will be incentivized to negotiate with protesters in hopes of getting back to full-speed capitalism as quickly as possible.

It surely angers citizens to have their day interrupted by a politicized highway shutdown, even if it only lasts a few minutes. That risks turning potential sympathizers against the movement, but BLM members say the inconvenience of a few minutes of traffic is nothing compared to the pain of dealing with rampant black deaths by government agents. “The disruption piece is our way of saying, ‘No business as usual,’ ” Cullors says. “You’re not going to keep killing us and think that you can just go about business as usual.” BLM members are clear that for their protests to be truly effective they must be disruptive to those who benefit from white privilege. “This conversation has been happening between black people for centuries, and white people don’t even have to acknowledge it exists,” says Mica Grim, a BLM activist from Minneapolis. “When we shut down the highway, it forces the conversation. It’s also our way of showing Middle America a little piece of the inconvenience that it is to be a person of color every day.”

Goggans says there's also a deeper psychological impact: "It's about reclaiming our power." Goggans, who has participated in at least seven shutdowns, says they have changed his life. "There's some weird magical thing that happens when you shut down a highway. And once you taste that kind of power, you start to ask yourself, 'Why do I not feel this in every part of my life?'"

Highway shutdowns could become more frightening in the future. Republican lawmakers in at least six states have brought up laws that would protect drivers who hit protesters blocking traffic. None of the proposals have become law, but the willingness to consider

indemnifying motorists against nonviolent protesters in BLM's highway shutdowns – as well as in traffic-blocking protests against Trump and the building of the pipeline at Standing Rock – has sent a message that was heard in the underground racist fringe where fantasies of hitting protesters with cars are shared online. It's not hard to see how all of this rhetoric could have contributed to the vehicular-homicide death of Heather Heyer.

Of course, a movement that spends a lot of time standing up to the police has come to expect retaliation. "I don't think black people living in America feel 100 percent safe any day of the week," Packnett says. "But when you intentionally confront oppression, you let go of even the semblance of safety that you may have had." Many members say that their phones are tapped and they have been surveilled and followed by police. There have been suspicious break-ins and strange cars parked outside members' homes. Cullors says her home has been raided twice by LAPD. She and many other members say they fear retaliation. "I think they're gonna try to kill me," says Pasadena BLM member Jasmine Abdullah. Cullors says that too. (The LAPD did not respond to a request for comment on this story.)

Despite the risks, they feel the need to keep fighting. "This work is too important to allow fear," says Reed, the St. Louis BLM member. Many echo that sentiment. "We don't protest because we want to, we protest because we *have* to," Packnett says. "We must create something different. We don't want our children and their children to be living with the same fear that we all are."

"We have to be visionary," says Abdullah about how BLM must function in the Trump era. "We have to see beyond the moment. Resistance is necessary, but it's not enough. We cannot let this moment tell us that all we need to do is stomp out white men with tiki torches. We have to do more than topple Confederate statues. We have to topple white supremacy, and to do that means imagining new systems."

But "fighting the system can be therapeutic," Abdullah says. "There is joy in the actual fight." Abdullah is a mother of three, and she beams with pride as she tells a story about her young son. In 2015, she was with BLM as they occupied LAPD headquarters for 18 days. Her boy was then four. "One of the hardest parts of an occupation is finding a

restroom,” she says, “and there’s a restroom inside the LAPD building. So he started going into the building to use the restroom, and this big six-foot-four cop told us no. He puts his hand on his gun and to my four-and-a-half-year-old son, he says, ‘You can’t come in.’ And my son looked all the way up at the cop and sits at the feet of the officer and starts meditating. He starts going, ‘Ommmm.’ And the cop backed off.

“I am very thankful to have a movement like this to raise kids in,” she says, “because black children cannot be blind. There’s no way to shield them from the reality of police abuse, so to be a part of the resistance movement, to be a part of BLM, is to say, ‘We don’t have to submit to it. You’re not powerless.’”

In This Article: Black Lives Matter, Donald Trump



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THE DISRUPTORS

Ashift has occurred in the year since Michael Brown's death sparked unrest in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014.

National conversations have arisen around issues affecting the black community in America: police brutality, economic injustice, racial inequality.

Names that might have made little more than local headlines have become national stories: Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland.

It didn't happen on its own. A grass-roots network of activists and allies is mobilizing through social media to shine a national spotlight on the struggles that come with being black in America.

Their rallying cry: Black lives matter. Their slogan: A movement, not a moment.

"They put things on the agenda that people were not talking about before," says author and UConn history professor Jelani Cobb.

Some critics are skeptical of their means and motives, saying it's not clear who's in charge and what they want. But the movement seeks to be intentionally broad to allow everyone to meet specific needs in their communities.

These activists reside outside traditional institutions and power structures. Many are social media influencers, better known by their Twitter handles than their real names, who can start a trending hashtag or a rally in the streets with a single tweet.

They have gotten the attention of many [2016 presidential candidates](#), though whether any of those candidates can secure the black activist vote remains to be seen. Observers say their next move is to create meaningful change in communities where they live.

Here are the stories of 13 of these "disruptors" who are rallying together and agitating for change.

#BlackWorkMatters



Charlene Carruthers wants to develop young, black leaders who can help build political power and change laws.

"There will always be a need for young black people to be organized."



Charlene Carruthers was at a meeting of young black activists in Chicago two years ago when word spread that George Zimmerman had been found not guilty of murdering Trayvon Martin. "Some people cried, some people screamed, some people left, some people were silent," Carruthers says. So she gathered about 20 people and led a strategy session in a nearby hotel room on how they could respond to the verdict. They decided to attend the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, do a series of digital town halls and release a videotaped statement to the Martin family.

Organizing the Black Youth Project 100

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A native of the South Side of Chicago, Carruthers holds a master's degree in social work and has been an activist and organizer for 12 years. Two years ago, she moved back to Chicago, where she is the national director of the Black Youth Project 100, an organization that focuses on issues affecting black youth. Carruthers has also been a supporter of the #SayHerName campaign, which shines a light on women of color who allegedly have been victims of police brutality. She's participating in the movement to increase the minimum wage to \$15 an hour with the hashtag #BlackWorkMatters too. Carruthers says she wants to continue to develop young, black leaders who can help build political power and change laws.



Charlene Carruthers

@CharleneCac

White people, what are you doing to end white supremacy?

8:07 AM - Jun 18, 2015

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#DreamDefenders



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Through Dream Defenders, Umi Selah works to campaign for voting rights and improved education in poor communities.

"People of our generation have a dream of being fulfilled, living a happy life, living in communities where people are fair to each other."



The catalyst for Umi Selah's involvement in social-justice issues was the controversial death of an unarmed black adolescent in Florida, but not the one you're thinking of. The year was 2006, and the youth was Martin Lee Anderson, 14, who died after being forced to exercise at a boot camp-style juvenile detention center. Despite being charged with aggravated manslaughter in Anderson's death, seven guards and one nurse were all acquitted. Selah joined the student government at Florida A&M University, where he co-founded a coalition for justice. His activism

continued to grow after college, particularly after the 2012 slaying of Trayvon Martin. Selah was living in North Carolina and working in pharmaceutical sales when he heard of Martin's death. "It woke me up from my slumber," says Selah, who recently changed his name from Phillip Agnew. Selah was one of a group of activists who met with President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder in December to discuss police brutality in the wake of the protests that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri.

How Selah watched Ferguson unfold online

In 2012, Selah co-founded Dream Defenders, a racial and social justice group based in Miami. The group now has seven full-time staff members, chapters in major Florida cities and an annual operating budget of about \$500,000. In 2013, the Dream Defenders held a sit-in at the Florida capitol for 31 days to protest that state's Stand Your Ground provision. Selah hopes to expand the Dream Defenders throughout Florida to campaign for voting rights, improved education for poor communities and an end to police brutality. Although the goals for the Dream Defenders are varied, Selah says, they all have one aim in common: "the liberation, the true freedom of black people, poor people and marginalized people in this country."



phillip agnew
@PhilofDDreams

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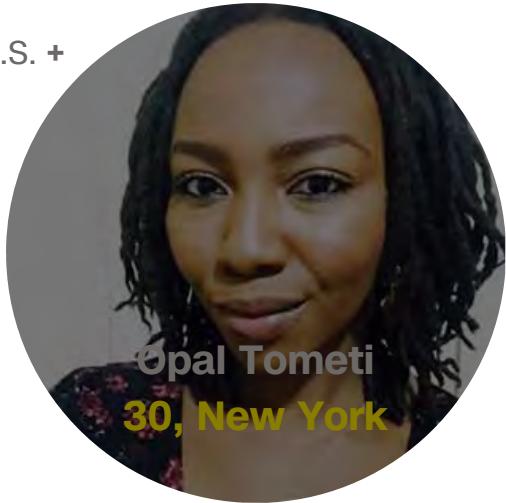
#BlackLivesMatter



Black Lives Matter has grown to 26 chapters in the United States and one in Toronto.

"So many of us have been forced to be the advocates and freedom fighters we are."

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Opal Tometi
30, New York



Patrisse Cullors
32, Los Angeles



Alicia Garza
34, Oakland

The date is burned into Alicia Garza's memory: July 13, 2013, a page on the calendar that means pain. "When George Zimmerman was acquitted in the murder of Trayvon Martin, I felt like I'd gotten punched in the stomach," she says. In response, Garza posted a message to the black community on Facebook. It included the phrase "black lives matter." Those words filled protest signs in the days that followed and became the namesake of the organization Garza would co-found with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi.

The women's paths crossed after years of advocacy work on their own. Cullors started in high school with the Black Student Union and a group that offered support for LGBT students. Tometi, a child of Nigerian immigrants raised in Arizona, fought for immigrant rights and led discussions for female survivors of sexual violence. Middle school marked the start of Garza's involvement with the reproductive justice movement. Garza and Cullors met

at a national conference for community organizers in Providence, Rhode Island. They met Tometi at the leadership training program Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity. Social media kept the women connected until they formed [#BlackLivesMatter](#) after the Zimmerman verdict.



Black Lives Matter

@Blklivesmatter

3 black women started [#BlackLivesMatter](#). 1 is Nigerian-American, 2 are queer. Complicate the narrative... Because all [#BlackLivesMatter](#)

8:26 AM - Feb 5, 2015

887 1,152 people are talking about this

#BlackLivesMatter's online presence swelled as violent incidents involving law enforcement rippled across the country. The movement grew on the ground as well; Cullors organized Freedom Rides to Ferguson, Missouri, after the death of Michael Brown, with the help of Darnell Moore of MicNews. About 500 people from 18 cities converged on Ferguson to support the protests, by her count. The outpouring was a signal that the organization needed a sustainable national presence. "After our time in Ferguson, many were transformed by the experience but also knew that Ferguson was everywhere," Tometi says. "That brutality, poverty and racism was also back in their respective home towns and cities."

The night Cullors resolved to go to Ferguson

U.S. +

Cullors took the lead, organizing local chapters. The three women traveled to support the groups, establishing 26 chapters in the United States and another in Toronto. The presence of local leaders has allowed Cullors, Garza and Tometi to continue working with other social justice groups while ensuring that each chapter has resources to address local issues. Cullors works for the [Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#) and founded [Dignity and Power Now](#), a group that advocates for incarcerated people and their families in Los Angeles. Garza is the special projects director for the [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#). Tometi serves as the executive director of the [Black Alliance for Just Immigration](#). Despite their work outside of #BlackLivesMatter, the founders remain true to its mission. They helped organize the first “Movement for Black Lives Convening” in Cleveland in July.

“Our intentions from the beginning with #BlackLivesMatter was to connect Black people together to take action together in defense of our lives and in defense of our world,” Garza says. “Those intentions are still true today.”

#WeTheProtestors





DeRay Mckesson believes social media highlights stories that otherwise would go unnoticed.

“We can live in a world where police do not kill people. That is a real expectation, a valid expectation, and we can actually create a world where that is true.”



Before August 9, DeRay Mckesson was making a decent living as a senior administrator for the Minneapolis Public Schools. A week after seeing images of Michael Brown's body flooding his Twitter feed, he jumped in his car to make the nine-hour drive to Ferguson, Missouri. The next night he was tear-gassed by police on West Florissant Avenue. “I thought, ‘this is not the America I know,’ ” he says. “‘This is not what America should be.’ ” Mckesson became a full-time protester after quitting his day job in March and is now one of the most prominent voices of the movement, someone who can set off a trending hashtag with one resonant tweet. He appears regularly on TV news shows (including on CNN) and pens op-eds for national media outlets. He sat next to [presidential candidate Rick Santorum](#) at a memorial for the victims of the Charleston church massacre and was among the VIP guests invited to the launch of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. His profile also has made him a regular target of

online trolls, death threats and critics such as Fox News anchor Sean Hannity, who called him a "professional protester" who is just out "to get paid," and Montel Williams, who says, "he's no MLK." In response, the King Center has called Mckesson "a man of consciousness whose life is threatened daily because of his activism."



deray
@deray

McKinney, Texas. 7/6/15. There were "too many black" kids at a party. Officers arrive. America. [TW]

10:22 AM - Jun 7, 2015

13.8K 31.7K people are talking about this

Mckesson uses social media to share news related to police-involved deaths, from photos and videos to police reports and court records. He believes social media can "highlight stories that otherwise would have gotten no visibility" and allows the movement to speak with more "immediacy and regularity" than previous civil rights struggles. As soon as Mckesson arrived in Ferguson, he began using Instagram and Twitter to share images of protests, information about rallies and resources for protesters. He also started the Ferguson Protest Newsletter to share news about campaigns, demonstrations, petitions and updates on Officer Darren Wilson's case. The newsletter eventually shifted focus to police-involved deaths and actions nationwide, growing into We The Protesters, a hub that includes activist

toolkits and stats related to police violence. Mckesson has returned to Ferguson for other protests and has visited Baltimore, Charleston and New York to document rallies and assist in organizing. "Either the story is never told," he says, "or it's told by everybody but us."

U.S. +

#SayHerName



Ashley Yates is working to build a network of people and organizations dedicated to ending structural racism on various fronts.

"Black people have been resisting since the first slave ships arrived. We have been resisting from day one, since we were brought over here."

U.S. +



Ashley Yates
30, Oakland

Ashley Yates became politicized as a teenager, when her aunt introduced her to the writings of James Baldwin, Sonia Sanchez and Assata Shakur. She honed her organizing skills as political chairwoman of the University of Missouri's Legion of Black Collegians, where she was inspired by a meeting with activist Fred Hampton Jr. And she protested in the streets after Trayvon Martin was slain in 2012. But her full-time activism wasn't triggered until Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri, which occurred just a few miles from her home. "It was Trayvon on my street. All of the rage and pain and trauma was right at my doorstep. I was fully committed, and I was all in."



ashley yates
@brownblaze

"How can someone be racist if they have friends who are Black?"

The same way serial killers can have friends who are alive.

11:41 AM - Feb 20, 2015

6,969 9,451 people are talking about this

Yates heard about Brown's death via Twitter and headed almost immediately to Ferguson, where she joined a group of activists outside the police department, demanding answers. Within a month, Yates had quit her merchandising job to focus on mobilizing others around issues of police

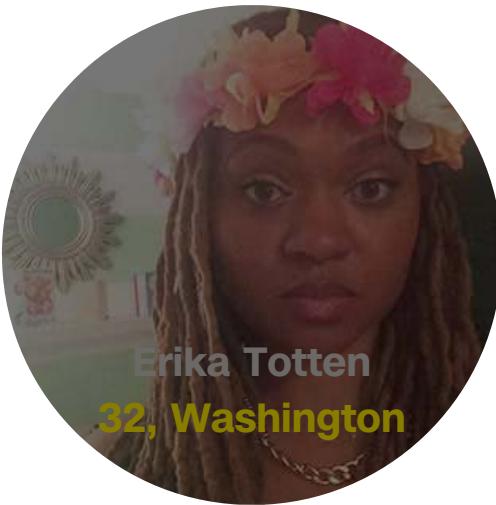
violence and racial equality. During protests across St. Louis, she joined Brittany Ferrell and Alexis Templeton to create Millennial Activists United, a grass-roots group that seeks to empower young women and people of color. Yates helped organize “Ferguson October: Weekend of Resistance” and was one of a group of activists who met with President Obama at the White House in December. More recently, she’s been planning events across the country to protest police killings of black women (#SayHerName), including a May demonstration in which a group of bare-breasted black women stopped traffic in San Francisco. Yates is working to build a network of people and organizations, in cooperation with more experienced leaders, dedicated to ending structural racism in law enforcement, education, the prison system and elsewhere.

#IfWeAintSafeInChurch



Erika Totten sees her role in the movement as an “emotional emancipator,” breaking down the constant stress she says black people live under.

“^{U.S.} No one has ever gotten liberation by following rules that the oppressor puts in place.”



You might recognize Erika Totten's handiwork even if you don't know her name. A head of the local Washington, Virginia and Maryland chapter of Black Lives Matter, Totten once led a partial shutdown of the highway that runs through the capital and had the lights thrown on during a screening of "Exodus: Gods and Kings," a piece of "white supremacist propaganda," as she called it. Her "team" [interrupted an event at the Netroots Nation conference](#) featuring Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley in July. The 32-year-old mother says she uses these radical tactics to break down barriers, heal hearts and change the system to ensure a better future for her children.



The genesis of Totten's activist work was the death of Trayvon Martin, an event that sent her into a deep depression. "I would look at black boys and girls and my children and husband and know that there would be no justice for them if anything were to happen," she says. When she saw the uprising in Ferguson blowing up her social media feed, she got in a car and drove 16 hours to join the cause. Totten now sees her main role in the movement as an "emotional emancipator," breaking down the constant stress she says black people live under. Totten spoke to CNN on a Sunday, an hour before heading to a "safe space" gathering that she helped organize at a park in Washington, a recent tradition born out of the Charleston massacre and bred by the hashtag #IfWeAintSafeInChurch. At the gatherings, Totten says, friends and strangers meet to picnic, pray and sing, and to "restore our spirits for the next week."

"I think a lot of black people feel heavy and have heavy hearts just from being black in this country."

#YouOkSis



Michelle Taylor started the hashtag #YouOkSis to shed light on daily incidents of street harassment women experience.

U.S. +

"People feel like they are being institutionally oppressed, and institutional oppression is costing us lives."



After Michael Brown was killed last summer, New York-based social worker and writer Michelle Taylor saw a few people tweeting about wanting to hold a vigil in Brown's memory. But the date, a summer Sunday in New York City when many people might be delayed by subway construction or out of town, worried Taylor. So she started the hashtag #NMOS14, or National Moment of Silence, and began using that to encourage others across the country via Twitter to hold vigils that Thursday night instead. The plan worked and within eight hours, Taylor says, she had "25 people in 25 cities agreeing to put something together." Within four days Taylor counted 119 vigils around the country. "The majority of the people who organized the vigils had never done anything like this before."



V 🌞 #GlitterOnTheCash 💕

@FeministaJones

JUST 💩 BECAUSE 💩 YOU 💩 DON'T 💩 EXPERIENCE 💩
SOMETHING 💩 IT 💩 DOESN'T 💩 MEAN 💩 IT 💩
DOESN'T 💩 HAPPEN

8:59 AM - Jun 27, 2015

Taylor, who goes by Feminista Jones online and calls herself a “post modern sex-positive, Black feminist woman,” wants to use her training and voice to advance the notion that black lives matter. “I just want to help people,” says Taylor, who has a master’s degree in organization leadership and management as well as public administration. “I can implement a vision and I can motivate people to implement that vision.” She hosts a podcast, was a weekly columnist for Ebony.com and is on the editorial board of BlogHer.com. In July 2014, Taylor started the hashtag #YouOkSis, which was meant to shed light on the daily incidents of street harassment women face. The hashtag became a viral sensation and a place where women could tell their stories of having been harassed and share intervention tactics. In 2014, Taylor won a Black Weblog Award for “Outstanding Achievement in Online Activism.”

#MikeBrown



President Obama appointed Brittany Packnett last year to a task force on the problem of police violence.

“Our humanity is non-negotiable.”

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Born in St. Louis, Brittany Packnett was raised with an activist mindset and recalls going to protests and marches at a young age. She taught third grade and worked for her congressman Rep. William Lacy Clay Jr. (D-Missouri) for several years before moving back home to become executive director of the St. Louis chapter of Teach for America, which encourages professionals to spend several years teaching at inner-city schools. Packnett joined the protests in Ferguson the day after Michael Brown's death, where her high profile and prolific social media posts quickly earned her national recognition. Packnett says Brown's death wasn't "a change so much as a reminder, a reminder that being continuously uncomfortable is necessary in this work."



Packnett's main goals are reducing police violence and inequities in the U.S. + criminal justice system and improving the lives of young people through education and social empowerment. "Change, real change, is a continual process," she says. President Obama appointed her last year to a task force on the problem of police violence; she and her colleagues issued a report with policy recommendations in April. Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon appointed Packnett to the Ferguson Commission, which is looking into broad issues affecting the St. Louis area. Despite these establishment roles, she remains an active protester and has not moderated her impassioned statements on social media. Still, she says, the constant drumbeat of police violence, death and racial conflict can be emotionally draining. "It's honestly really sad to me that we have so many names that have become hashtags," she says, "and yet, it's important for people to not forget the names."

#MappingPoliceViolence



Johnetta Elzie believes social media has allowed black people to control the narrative by telling their own stories.

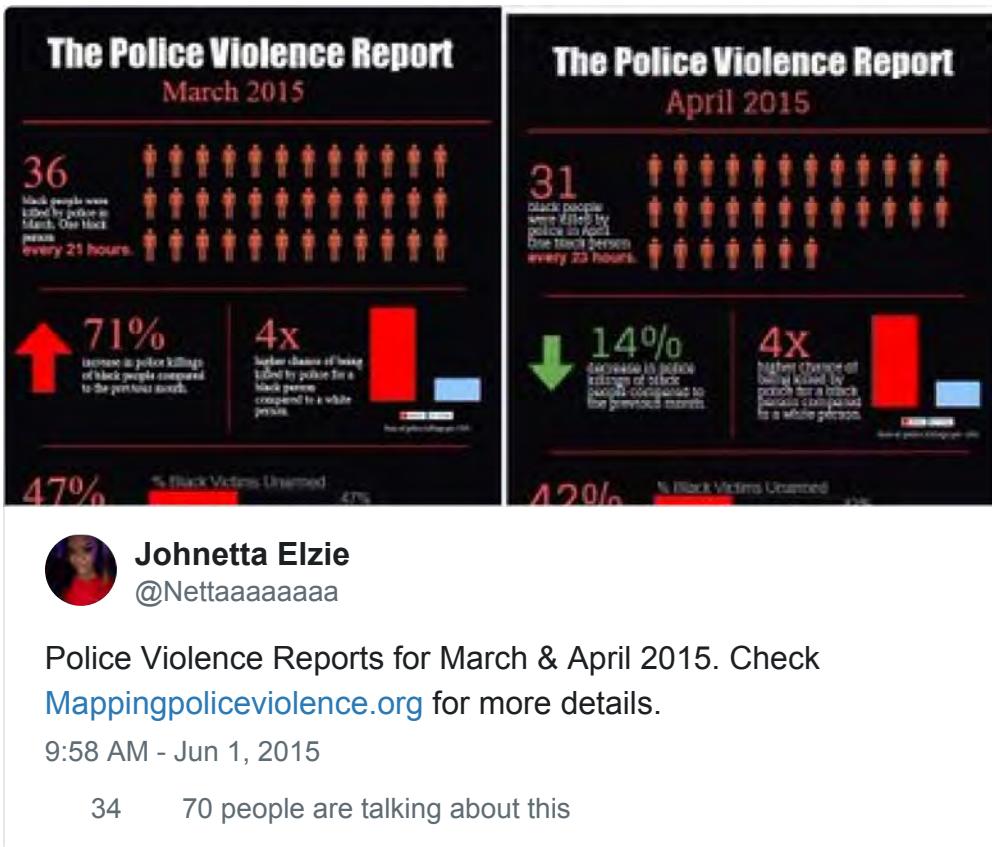
^{U.S.}⁺ **“Having national attention on issues that affect the black community is something that’s never happened in my generation, and it would not have happened without social media.”**



After Trayvon Martin was fatally shot in 2012, Johnetta Elzie donned a hoodie and marched with other protesters in her hometown of St. Louis. After the rally, though, she was at a loss for ways to help save black people in her community from a similar fate. Three years later, the 26-year-old is traveling the country to talk at conferences and workshops about police accountability and organizing on social media. Michael Brown's death "radicalized" her into action, says Elzie, who has also lost a friend to a deadly encounter with police. "Every black person knows someone who has been harmed by police violence." She was in Ferguson hours after Brown's death and was stunned by what she witnessed: children who described seeing his body lying in the street; adults running from police dogs. "Our babies shouldn't know that this is the norm," she says. "They shouldn't have to experience this kind of trauma."

Elzie was a fixture in Ferguson leading up to a grand jury's decision in November not to indict Officer Darren Wilson. She and DeRay Mckesson came up with a messaging system that alerted more than 50,000 people to news of the decision. Since then, she has worked with Mckesson to campaign for police accountability. Her main projects include Mapping Police Violence, which collects data on police killings, and Check the Police,

a growing database of police union contracts and other law enforcement-related documents.



"Police violence is national conversation." Social media has allowed black people to control the narrative by telling their own stories, Elzie says, cutting out the need for mainstream media to inform the public. "People are getting information quicker and holding folks in power accountable."

#JusticeTogether





Shaun King mobilizes activists through his writings and is on the board of Justice Together, a new group dedicated to fighting police brutality.

“A tweet is fast. But everything about policy change is very slow. And a lot of us are impatient.”



Shaun King's passion for activism was kindled in high school in rural Kentucky, when he says he was severely injured after being assaulted by a group of white students. King, who is mixed-race, missed 18 months of school while recovering from spinal surgeries, he says, but the ordeal led him to become an advocate for social justice: “It changed the trajectory of my life.” Since graduating from Morehouse College, King has worked as a teacher, a counselor, a pastor, an author and a motivational

speaker. Since last fall, he's been a staff writer at the liberal blog Daily Kos, covering issues around race and police brutality. He did not visit Ferguson or Baltimore, although he has written extensively about the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray and others.

Dear Mike. We will not stop fighting for you brother.

pic.twitter.com/ZhhqPRFFT8

— Shaun King (@ShaunKing) November 25, 2014

King mobilizes activists through his writings and is on the board of [Justice Together](#), a new group dedicated to fighting police brutality. He also uses Twitter and Facebook daily to post news, essays, articles and provocations about racism and police brutality. "I see my role as sort of an informed outsider. I try to talk about it from outside the storm instead of being in the eye of the storm." He sees no evidence that police brutality toward minorities in the U.S. has decreased in the past year, which he finds "deeply discouraging." King would like to see more black police officers and prosecutors, as well as greater transparency about police interactions with the people they arrest. In the meantime, he remains convinced that Americans are becoming more informed and engaged about the issue. "I'm convinced we're on the brink of some change. But it's not happening yet."

#Ferguson





Kayla Reed became an activist overnight. "A door kind of opened for me."

"People think that we do this just because we hate the police, and that's not the issue. We love our people enough to fight for them, to make sure that police are accountable."



**Kayla Reed
25, St. Louis**

A year ago, Kayla Reed was a pharmacy technician with a second job at a furniture store. Reed was at that second job on August 9, 2014, when a woman told her a police officer had just shot a young man outside the Canfield Green Apartments in nearby Ferguson. When she finished work, Reed joined the crowd gathered at the scene of Michael Brown's death, where confusion and outrage were brewing. As more police arrived, by her account heavily armed and aggressive, a group of community members formed to demand answers. Reed became an activist overnight. "A door kind of opened for me," says the lifelong St. Louis resident. "There was this sense of community. I had never seen anything like that before." Despite the chaos and the tear gas, Reed returned to Ferguson day after day

to bear witness and push for change. "I just felt like I had to come out every day to make sure the people I knew were okay." U.S. +

**Kayla Reed**

@iKaylaReed

The preservation of ALL life is necessary but there is ONLY a systematic genocide against people of color. Which is why **#BlackLivesMatter**

11:08 PM - Dec 10, 2014

46 73 people are talking about this

Reed now works full-time with the [Organization for Black Struggle](#), an activist group that trains young people, engages in protest and pushes for policy change. Reed also sees her role as an occasional citizen journalist. She contends that law enforcement has grown unnecessarily violent and aggressive since August 2014, and she regularly uses Twitter to draw attention to alleged police misconduct. A year out from the initial uprising in Ferguson, Reed thinks it's time for the protest movement to engage in self-reflection and spread a message fundamentally centered on the concept of love.

By: Brandon Griggs, Emanuella Grinberg, Katia Hetter, Wyatt Massey, Melonyce McAfee, David Shortell, Tanzina Vega and Eli Watkins. Videos by Brenna Williams.

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Get Up,

STAND UP

Social Media Helps
Black Lives Matter
Fight the Power
by Bijan Stephen

by Philip Montgomery

IN THE 1960S, if you were a civil rights worker stationed in the Deep South and you needed to get some urgent news out to the rest of the world—word of a beating or an activist’s arrest or some brewing state of danger—you would likely head straight for a telephone.

From an office or a phone booth in hostile territory, you would place a call to one of the major national civil rights organizations. But you wouldn’t do it by dialing a standard long-distance number. That would involve speaking first to a switchboard operator—who was bound to be white and who might block your call. Instead you’d dial the number for something called a Wide Area Telephone Service, or WATS, line.

Like an 800 line, you could dial a WATS number from anywhere in the region and the call would patch directly through to the business or organization that paid for the line—in this case, say, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

On the other end of the line, another civil rights worker would be ready to take down your report and all the others pouring in from

out to organization leaders, the media, the Justice Department, lawyers, and other friends of the movement across the country.

In other words, it took a lot of infrastructure to live-tweet what was going on in the streets of the Jim Crow South.



Massive crowds of media and mourners congregate around the casket of Michael Brown at Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church on August 25, 2014. **PHILIP MONTGOMERY**



On April 30, 2015, demonstrators in Baltimore make their way to city hall, demanding justice for Freddie Grey, a 25-year-old black man who died in police custody.

PHILIP MONTGOMERY

Any large social movement is shaped by the technology available to it and tailors its goals, tactics, and rhetoric to the media of its time. On the afternoon of Sunday, March 7, 1965, when voting-rights marchers in Selma, Alabama, were run down by policemen at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the WATS lines were in heavy use. (“Here come the white hoodlums,” an activist said from a corner pay phone at 3:25 pm.) But the technology that was most important to the movement’s larger

crew, racing for the Montgomery airport and heading to New York for an evening broadcast. That night, 48 million Americans would watch the scene in their living rooms, and a few days later Martin Luther King Jr. would lay bare the movement's core media strategy. "We will no longer let them use their clubs on us in the dark corners," he said. "We're going to make them do it in the glaring light of television."

"The tools that we have to organize and to resist are fundamentally different than anything that's existed before in black struggle."

"It was a rare admission," writes media historian Aniko Bodroghkozy. "King and other civil rights organizers seldom acknowledged their own self-conscious use of the mass media." Today's African-American civil rights organizers, by contrast, talk about the tools of mass communication all the time—because their media strategy sessions are largely open to everyone on the Internet.

If you're a civil rights activist in 2015 and you need to get some news out, your first move is to choose a platform. If you want to post a video of a protest or a violent arrest, you put it up on Vine, Instagram, or Periscope. If you want to avoid trolls or snooping authorities and you need to coordinate some kind of action, you might chat privately with other activists on GroupMe. If you want to rapidly mobilize a bunch of people you know and you don't want the whole world clued in, you use

And if, God forbid, you find yourself standing in front of the next Michael Brown or Walter Scott, and you know the nation's attention needs to swerve hard to your town, your best bet might be to send a direct message to someone like DeRay Mckesson, one of a handful of activists who sit at the apex of social networks that now run hundreds of thousands strong. "The thing about King or Ella Baker is that they could not just wake up and sit at the breakfast table and talk to a million people," says Mckesson, a former school district administrator who has become one of the most visible faces of the movement. "The tools that we have to organize and to resist are fundamentally different than anything that's existed before in black struggle."



#BLACKLIVESMATTER BECAME A HASHTAG in the summer of 2013, when an Oakland, California, labor organizer named Alicia Garza responded on her Facebook page to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who gunned down Trayvon Martin. Since then it has become the banner under which dozens of disparate organizations, new and old, and millions of individuals, loosely and tightly related, press for change.

Any phenomenon that seizes the nation's attention this much needs a name—headline writers make sure of that. But it is hard to talk about the national **Black Lives Matter** movement without imparting a false sense of institutional coherence to it. Of course, the civil rights movement of the '60s was itself far from monolithic, but there aren't really analogues to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in today's activist scene. "It's decentralized but coordinated," says Maurice Mitchell, an organizer with a group called Blackbird. "There are no top-down mandates."



On April 30, 2015, hundreds of demonstrators in Baltimore make their way to city hall, demanding justice for Freddie Grey, a 25-year-old black man who died in police custody.

PHILIP MONTGOMERY



Members of the Nation of Islam gather near Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church, where the funeral for Michael Brown was held. **PHILIP MONTGOMERY**

You could look at it this way: The movement of the '60s needed a big institutional structure to make things work—in part because of the limitations of the tech at the time. Now that kind of structure has come to seem vestigial. After Michael Brown was shot dead in Ferguson, Missouri, and the city became a lightning rod for activism, McKesson says he had a kind of epiphany about movement-building: “We didn’t

and coordinate their movements in real time. And it could swiftly push back against spurious media narratives with the force of a few thousand retweets.

Of course, some level of institution-building is still crucial, as the movement has realized. And there are downsides to the media environment that today's activists have adapted to. Despite its success in making videos of police violence go viral, social media itself has become another arena where black people are abused. Harassment, threats, and insults are basic hazards of online activism today, but they are especially pervasive for anyone speaking on the touchy subject of race in America. Mckesson, for one, says he has blocked more than 15,000 people from interacting with him on Twitter. He retweets some of the haters. It's occasionally hard to read. (There's a stale, conventional wisdom that says overt racism is largely a thing of the past in America. Whoever says this clearly has not spent much time on Twitter. God help them if they start reading comments on YouTube.)

This might seem like an opportunity: Drawing hate out into the light was, after all, a signature tactic of the civil rights movement. Televised footage of well-dressed white people heckling black children as they walked to school were powerful because they were so public, says Lisa Nakamura, a professor of media and race at the University of Michigan. "But when that happens on Twitter, it's really, really private." Any given tweet might be public, but online threats are disembodied and anonymous. Bystanders don't seem to take them as seriously. Plus, the full experience of receiving a thousand threats may

And of course, social media is also profoundly susceptible to surveillance. We know now that many leaders of Black Lives Matter have been monitored by federal law enforcement agencies. That has prompted many to start seeking out more secure channels; in nearly all my conversations with activists about how they use different platforms, there was a point when they told me they didn't want to say any more for security reasons.



On the 11th day of protests after Michael Brown's death, state and local authorities scream at demonstrators and the media to stay back while they make an arrest. **PHILIP MONTGOMERY**

helped secure the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina capitol. It helped pressure the federal government to investigate police practices in Ferguson and Baltimore. It has successfully pushed Democratic presidential contenders to come forward with policy proposals on the issues that specifically concern black people in America. And an offshoot of the movement, a project called [Campaign Zero](#) that was organized in part by Mckesson, has put forward a bunch of specific policy proposals to uproot police violence. A huge reason for all this success is that, perhaps more than any other modern American protest movement, they've figured out how to marshal today's tools.

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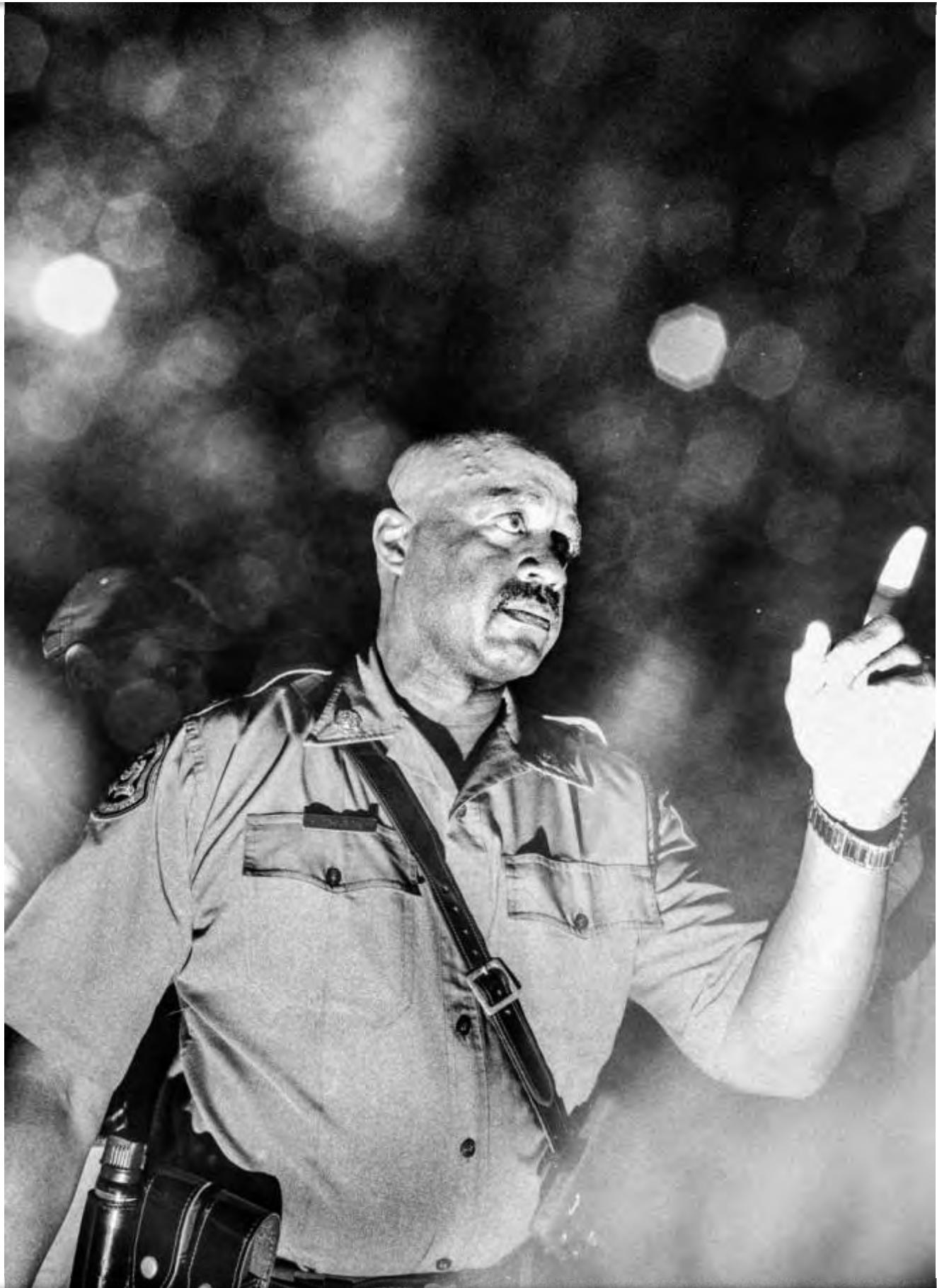


Protesters walk up West Florissant Avenue, near the street where Michael Brown was shot by a police officer.

THE MOVEMENT HAS also had another profound but less concrete effect: I believe that Black Lives Matter has changed the visceral experience of being black in America. I see this in the way it has

the rise of a new group of black public intellectuals and in the
beginnings of a new political language. And I see it in my own
experience.

I grew up in Tyler, Texas, a small city in the eastern part of the state, in the 2000s. I attended the local Catholic high school—not the local public school named after Robert E. Lee, where the majority of the student body was nonwhite. No one called me a nigger, though white friends would sometimes use the slur to refer to other black people; in the next breath, they'd assure me I was different. Despite constantly feeling like I was a token, or that I had to tiptoe around white sensitivities, I couldn't have told you what ailed me. I wasn't politically conscious. I didn't have the language to speak about microaggressions, aggression-aggressions, or structural prejudice. I just endured a thing I wasn't totally sure I was enduring.







A protestor in a stand-off with police in Ferguson, August 18, 2014.

PHILIP MONTGOMERY

But I can still remember the fluorescent lighting of my high school's hallways and the pervasive sense that something was deeply wrong. The air itself felt toxic. I had nightmares about nuclear reactors sending clouds of poison into the sky. On those nights I'd wake up and

Does it seem strange that I now associate those dreams with racism? That I see the unease I felt then as a species of profound alienation that I wasn't at all able to comprehend, because nothing I'd experienced before had prepared me to understand unthinking hate? This kind of clarity about my own experience has come with time and distance. I can't help but think that if I'd been a few years younger—if my upbringing in Tyler had overlapped with the past two years of digital and intellectual ferment in America—I would have realized far earlier that what I felt wasn't particularly unusual. "All of a sudden," Mckesson says, "you see that there's a community of people who share the same symptoms."



Of course, shared symptoms are not enough. That's why Black Lives Matter appears to be shifting into a new phase. "The movement doesn't win if there's only a small set of people who understand the solutions," Mckesson says. The movement wins when there's a broad understanding that we need a system that doesn't kill people, when a critical mass of citizens can envision what that looks like, and when concrete steps are taken to make it happen. Historians of the 1960s talk about how the media of the time helped establish a "new common sense" about race in America. I think the new common sense being established now is that racism and the struggle against it do not exist somewhere in the distant past; racial activism didn't end after King and the Black Panther Party. Technology has helped make today's struggle feel both different from and continuous with the civil rights era. All the terror and greatness we associate with that moment is right in front of our faces, as near to us as our screens.

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